Revolution in Charity
Chapter Four
PHILOTHEA

The circulation of the Treatise on the Love of God was considerable; that of Francis de Sales’ previous work, the Introduction to the Devout Life, was nothing short of phenomenal. The Introduction first appeared in January or February of 1609. This edition was so quickly exhausted that a second one appeared about September of the same year, with corrections by the author. Further revised editions came out in 1610, 1616, and 1619. During the lifetime of the Bishop of Geneva, there, the book went through five editions, without counting the number of reprints. The booksellers were hard put to keep a supply of it in stock, so great was the demand. The work continued to be republished after the author’s death, soon becoming as standard devotional literature as the Lives of the Saints.

Nor were France and Savoy alone in their appreciation for the Introduction. By 1620, it had been translated into Latin, Spanish, Italian, Flemish and, by 1627, into German. The first English translation was published at Douai in 1613; in 1614 it had already gone through three editions. Marie de Medici sent a copy, magnificently bound and ornamented with diamonds, to James I, as a New Year’s gift. He was extremely pleased with it, carrying it about with him for six weeks. The book became exceedingly popular in England, among Anglicans as well as Catholics. Archbishop Laud permitted its publication after due censorship. Unfortunately the printer, one “Nicholas Oakes of London,” reinserted some of the deleted phrases, so that, in view of the large sales of the book, Laud and Charles I were alarmed. A royal proclamation, dated May 14, 1637, therefore ordered this edition to be confiscated and burnt publicly wherever found. There is no indication, however, that the measure was intended to stop further publication.

What were the contents of this remarkable work? It treated of devotion, which, according to Francis de Sales, is the diligence with which men follow the course indicated by Charity: “In order to be devout, it is necessary to have, besides Charity, a great vivacity and promptitude in

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1 St. Francis de Sales, Oeuvres de…, Mackey, Navatel, etc., eds. (Annecy: Imprimerie J. Nierat, 1932), Vol. 3
2 Ibid., p. xviii.
3 Ibid., pp. xxi-xxvi.
4 Ibid., pp. xxv-xxvi.
5 Ibid., pp. xxvii-xxviii.
7 John Rushworth, ed., Historical Collections (London: J. Wright and R. Chiswell, 1680), Vol. 2, pp. 410-411. Dom Mackey cited this proclamation in Vol. 3, p. xxix. He stated that Charles ordered the book to be seized and burned in order to clear himself of the charge of being partial to the Catholics, despite the fact that the translation had been approved by Laud. There is no mention of the delinquent printer. On consideration of the actual text of the proclamation, Mackey’s version is dubious.
charitable actions.”

“Charity and devotion are no different form one another than the flame is from the fire, inasmuch as Charity, being spiritual fire, when it is burying brightly is called devotion.”

There was great need for work on the subject. As De Sales said in his preface, works on devotion had generally been intended for those living in monastic or semi-monastic seclusion. People in the world, at court, amidst their families, had no idea that they too could attain a higher perfection than perfunctory religious practice. Francis de Sales therefore proposed to demonstrate the possibility of a truly devout life in any worldly calling. In this endeavor he had the full approbation not only of his colleagues, but also of Henry IV. The King saw his subjects regarding God, on the one hand, as a too indulgent Master, and on the other, as a tyrant ready to pounce upon the slightest imperfection. In either case, they hardly made devotion a part of their daily lives. Henry IV was acquainted with the attitude of the Bishop of Geneva; he communicated to him his desire that something be done to remedy the situation. De Sales needed no such prodding. He had come in contact with many perplexed souls in his own diocese, as well as in Paris. He only needed the leisure to summarize and develop his early letters of direction.

As the Treatise was addressed to Theotimus, the lover of God, so the Introduction to the Devout Life was intended for Philothea, also the lover of God. The two works supplement each other; the doctrine contained in the former was already implicit in the latter. Philothea was not instructed in the theories of divine love. She was rather to be initiated into the details of its practice in daily life.

Francis de Sales began by explaining that a truly devout life is suitable for every vocation: “In the creation, God commanded the plants to bear fruit, each according to its kind: thus does he command Christians, who are the living plants of his Church, to produce the fruits of devotion, each according to his quality and occupation.” True devotion, after all, spoils nothing; it is only the false variety, so often esteemed by the world, which can be contrary to duty. This type, later to be immortalized by Tartuffe, was delightfully characterized by De Sales. “Whoever is given to fasting will consider himself very devout provided he fasts; not daring to dip his tongue in wine or even water, for the sake of moderation, yet he will not

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8 St. Francis de Sales, op. cit., Vol. 3, p. 15.
9 Ibid., p. 16.
10 As Bremond has pointed out in Vol. 1, p. 67 of his Histoire Litteraire du Sentiment Religieux en France, De Sales had precursors in his task. Father Richeome, for example, had written a book on the same subject, but he lost himself in a maze of oratory and technical detail. The value of his work and of the others was very much restricted.
11 St. Francis de Sales, op. cit., p. 6.
12 Ibid., p. ix.
13 The fact that the Introduction was addressed to a female figure does not indicate that it was meant for women exclusively. The book was addressed to the human soul; it was almost superfluous to point out that in French the word soul was feminine.
14 St. Francis de Sales, I., p. 19.
hesitate to plunge it into the blood of his neighbor by backbiting and calumny....Another gladly takes alms from his purse to give to the poor, but he is unable to draw sufficient kindness from his heart to forgive his enemies; the other will forgive his enemies, but to deal justly with his creditors-never! except under compulsion by the courts. All those people are commonly taken for devout... in reality they are only statues and phantoms of devotion."\(^{15}\) Devotion is not to be confined to one set of exterior manifestations. Either it permeates the whole being and every action emanating therefrom, or it is nothing.

This fact established, Philothea was directed in her religious practices, so that she might dispose herself for the truly Christian life. This involved instruction in prayer, meditation, spiritual exercises, and attendance at the Sacraments-the prime requisites being a loving heart, moderation and the absolute avoidance of ostentation. She was also enjoined to enter whatever confraternities might be accessible to her, for God is best glorified through the accomplishment of good works in common with others.\(^{16}\)

In order to give practical expression to the feeling for devotion which Philothea thus acquired in religion she was advised to concentrate on one exercise of the virtues, such as nursing the poor and sick, caring for the indigent, or catechizing little children. She was to do this, not in order to neglect other good works, but to give a necessary focus to her attention.\(^{17}\) Francis de Sales emphasized the humble virtues; he warned Philothea against too great an ambition for saintliness. The occasions for a grand martyrdom are rare, and so are mystical ecstasies, which, properly speaking, are rewards rather than virtues. It therefore behooved Philothea to content herself with the qualities required in daily life: patience, compassion, forbearance, an even temper, diligence, fervor and so forth.\(^{18}\) If she applied herself to these and loved her fellowman in God, her family, friends, and servants as well as she herself would benefit immeasurably.\(^{19}\)

Four virtues, however, she was obligated to practice, whatever her estate: obedience, chastity, poverty and humility- the four branches of the cross.\(^{20}\) The first needed little explanation; De Sales dwelled rather more on the other three. He carefully indicated to Philothea the nature and duties of conjugal love, together with the manifest folly and danger of flirtations and similar attachments.

“Love holds the first rank among the passions of the soul...it converts them to itself and makes us such as that which we love. Take care then, Philothea, to have no evil love, for you will in consequence also be evil.”\(^{21}\)

\(^{15}\) Ibid., p. 14.  
\(^{16}\) Ibid., p. 104.  
\(^{17}\) Ibid., pp. 126-127.  
\(^{18}\) Ibid., p. 131.  
\(^{19}\) Ibid., p. 349.  
\(^{20}\) Ibid., pp. 171-172.  
\(^{21}\) Ibid., pp. 194-195.
Concerning the virtue of poverty, Philothea was to remember that she must be poor in spirit if she was rich in fact. She had perfect liberty to occupy herself with business affairs, but her care for them was not to exceed the diligence suitable to the administration of a trust given by God.\textsuperscript{22} It would be well for her to give alms to the poor. If she wanted to attain real perfection, however, she was to “Love the poor and poverty, or by this love you will become truly poor... If then you love the poor, go frequently among them: take pleasure in seeing them in your house and in visiting them in theirs; be joyful when they approach you in church, on the street, or elsewhere. Be poor of tongue with them, speaking to them as their companion, but be rich of hand, giving most abundantly of your goods.”\textsuperscript{23}

If Philothea did not consider this sufficient, but desired to be poorer than the poor, then there was another possibility. “The servant is less than his master: therefore become a servant of the poor; go to nurse them when they are sick, I mean with your own hands; be their cook, and at your own expense; be their seamstress and washerwoman. O my Philothea, this service is more triumphant than kingship!”\textsuperscript{24}

Of all the virtues, however, humility was to be considered the most essential foundation. It was to be held in the heart, where it belongs, and not merely in face or gesture.\textsuperscript{25} If mortification was necessary to attain this state, Francis de Sales preferred that of the spirit. “I have never been able to approve of the method of those who, in order to reform man, begin with the outside, with looks, dress, hair. It seems to me, on the contrary, that it is necessary to start with the interior.”\textsuperscript{26}

“Certainly, in order to cure a rash it is not as useful to bathe as it is to purify the blood... thus, to cure us of our vices it is indeed good to mortify the flesh, but it is above all necessary thoroughly to purify our affection and refresh our hearts.”\textsuperscript{27} This puts an end to the old habit of regarding charity as a useful means of mortification, as well as to excessive fasting, flagellation, and other penances.

In cases of temptation, Philothea was to have recourse to God, firmly refuse her consent in spirit, and not trouble herself immoderately.\textsuperscript{28} Again, there is no indication that good works were to be the cure for any wills of the spirit.

The keynote of the \emph{Introduction to the Devout Life} is the same as in the subsequent \emph{Treatise}: the supremacy of the love of God and its unity with the love of man, to be cherished, not remotely as an abstraction, but in personal daily practice. This theme is also to be found throughout the voluminous correspondence of the Bishop of Geneva. From the beginning of his

\begin{footnotes}
\item[22] \textit{Ibid.}, p. 169.
\item[23] \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 189-190.
\item[24] \textit{Ibid.}, p. 190.
\item[25] \textit{Ibid.}, p 162.
\item[26] \textit{Ibid.}, p. 217.
\item[27] \textit{Ibid.}, p. 222.
\item[28] \textit{Ibid.}, p. 304.
\end{footnotes}
episcopate till the end of his life, he was literally swamped with requests for spiritual direction. One lady wrote to him, saying that she had read both the *Introduction* and the *Treatise* - the former six times in one year. She humbly asked him to guide her, inasmuch as “God has caused you to be born in this century to teach us the meaning of virtue.”

Most of the correspondents were women; they brought him not only to their religious perplexities but also their family problems. To each one he gave the same answer: Charity and devotion, with all their implications, are both necessary and suitable in every calling.

One correspondent of long standing, Madame Brulart, apparently had written him a plaintive letter about the dreary case of a wife, mother and housekeeper. Francis de Sales replied, not without a touch of asperity, “The remedy would be to take the trouble of persuading yourself and of steeping your spirit in this sentiment: that God wishes you to serve him as you are, both by the exercises which are suitable to your estate and by the actions which it entails...you must not think of this merely in passing; you must put this consideration uppermost in your heart....And believe me, everything contrary to this advice is nothing but self-love.”

The following year he counseled her to keep her temper under control and use more patience with her family and servants.

Such injunctions were not a triviality; love and consideration for one’s fellow-man was one of De Sales’ constant themes. He advocated it on all occasions, for, after all, “This miserable life is only a preparation for the happy one to come...let us not be angry on the way; let us go with our companions tenderly and peaceably.”

The question remains, did the direction of Francis de Sales have such an effect on his readers and correspondents as to change their whole lives, including their attitudes towards charity? Very little is known about most of them, although there are some facts available concerning the circle that gathered around the Bishop of Geneva during his second and last visit to Paris in 1618-1619.

On the occasion, Charles-Emmanuel-no doubt recalling De Sales’ previous diplomatic
success and close ties with France—had sent him to accompany Cardinal Maurice of Savoy on a mission of some delicacy. They were to complete arrangements for the marriage of the Prince of Savoy with Christine of France, sister of Louis XIII. The wedding took place in due course, but that did not set Francis de Sales at liberty. He was obligated to accompany the Court and the newly wedded pair on their royal progress through the provinces to Savoy. Also among the entourage was the young Bishop of Lucon, the future Cardinal de Richelieu. He had very interesting conversations with his eminent colleague from Savoy on the duties of bishops towards their flock. Francis de Sales happily reported that Richelieu “swore me undying friendship and told me that in the end he would come to my view, to think only of God and the salvation of souls.” Possibly the Bishop of Lucon changed his mind subsequently.

At the same time, Cardinal de la Rochefoucauld was offering De Sales the position of coadjutor to the Bishop of Paris, Cardinal de Retz. De Retz fully approved of the project, as did the Court. It did not materialize, however. The Bishop of Geneva would leave his diocese only if death or spiritual retreat called him, unless some outstanding service to God were involved. This was apparently not the case.

More positively important to posterity than these negotiations was his brief stay in Paris. When the business of the royal marriage did not take all his time, he preached several sermons a day in various churches, and lectured on spiritual subjects in the convents of the Carmelites, the Ursulines, or the Visitation. There the ladies of the Court and the city flocked to hear him.

Among his circle of new friends was the Arnauld family. Through them he became acquainted with the renowned Angelique Arnauld, abbess of Port-Royal. She was beset by numerous spiritual anxieties, and lost no time in asking Francis de Sales for his counsel and direction. He gave her both in full measure, advising her to restrain her impetuous nature and her impatience with the imperfections of others. Nor was she to indulge in excessive scruples and self-doubts: “We should not call affliction into our hearts, as did Our Lord, because we are unable to bear it as he did.” She was, on the contrary, to go her way in peace, looking not where she was going, but with whom, that is, regarding God alone. Indeed Francis de Sales’ direction was supremely suited for one of such severely self-critical temperament as Angelique Arnauld; it was one of his steady maxims that “we must not be too punctilious in the exercise of the virtues, but we must proceed roundly, frankly, naively...in good faith and the grand manner.

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37 Ibid., p. 151.
39 St. Francis de Sales, op. cit., Vol. 19, p. 15.
40 Ibid., Vol. 18, p. 379.
41 Ibid., p. 400.
fear the spirit of constraint and melancholy.”  

Such advice, valuable at any time, was especially important in an age of religious ferment, for in freeing the spirit of superfluous anxiety it liberated untold energies. Angelique Arnauld responded to it. She wished, in fast, to be released from her vows at Port-Royal in order to become a novice in the Order founded by Francis de Sales. Her ecclesiastical superiors in France and Rome decided otherwise; in the same year, 1622, the Bishop of Geneva died. His influence on her was to be undone, for presently she came under the way of Saint-Cyran and the Jansenist school of thought.

There was a group of Parisian ladies, however, who remained faithful to the teaching of Francis de Sales. He has indeed been credited with the preparation of workers for Vincent de Paul. The names of some of them have come down to us.

Madame de Villeneuve, for example, was unhappily married and sought consolation in God. She had several interviews with De Sales in Paris and maintained a steady correspondence with him until his death. Judging by his replies, he evidently considered her one of his most promising Philotheas. Madame de Villeneuve, not content with having joined the Ladies of the Hotel-Dieu, founded the Congregation of the Daughters of the Cross. Francis de Sales had told her of this desire one day to establish a company of women devoted to the instruction and edification of others. With the help of Vincent de Paul she realized this project; established in 1636, the Daughters of the Cross dedicated themselves to teaching little girls.

Of equal fervor was Madame de Herse. She too had requested the spiritual direction of Francis de Sales, and he continued to advise his “well-beloved daughter” after his return to Annecy. She was one of the first Ladies of Charity in Paris, working indefatigably for the founding home and for the relief for the ruined provinces. She also had considerable standing at Court; it was she who was chosen to distribute the Queen’s alms in Paris at the time of the Fronde.

Then there was Madame de Lamoignon. Both she and her husband were good friends of the Bishop of Geneva, while one of their daughters was eventually to join the Order he

42 Ibid., Vol. 13, p. 392.
43 Ibid., Vol. 6, p. 217.
46 St. Francis de Sales, op. cit., Vol. 19, pp. 18-19, 261-262; Vol. 20, pp. 146-147
49 St. Francis de Sales, op. cit., Vol. 19, pp. 271-274; Vol. 20, pp. 256-257.
founded. Practically nothing of his correspondence with Madame de Lamoignon has survived, but he is known to have held her devotion in high esteem. She was a member of the ladies of the Hotel-Dieu; she also distributed alms in her house. Her compassion was so manifest that at her death the people of Paris mourned her as the “Mother of the Poor.”

Less renowned was Madame Baudeau, a plain woman of the Parisian lower middle class. She too must have been a disciple of Francis de Sales, for he wrote her: “I feel a special happiness in thinking of you, having seen in your heart a true inspiration to serve Our Lord well by the holy obedience which we owe to his will. It is a great fortune that this is so in these times, in your estate, and in that city.” She was probably associated with the Charity in Paris; St. Jane de Chantal reported of her that she had caught scarlet fever, visiting the prisoners condemned to the galleys.

There were others, whose names were only briefly mentions-Madame Amelot, Madame de Montigny, Madame de Villesavin, Madame Le nain de Crevant, Madame Sevin, the foundress of the first soup-kitchens in Paris. Doubtless many women who also carried the teaching of Francis de Sales into their daily lives have long sine been forgotten. One, however, so far overshadowed the rest-the Philotheas of Paris and of the earlier years-that she was eventually canonized. Her name of Jeanne-Francoise Fremyot de Chantal. It was through her that Francis de Sales realized his dream of founding an Order dedicated to the union of active and contemplative love of God-his whole philosophy of life.

53 St. Francis de Sales, op. cit., Vol. 20, pp. 149-150.
54 St. Jane de Chantal, op. cit., Vol. 1; Mere Francoise de Chaugy, La Vie de la Bienheureuse Mere Jeanne-Francoise Fremyot de Chantal, p. 591.